Chapter Seven

परस्त्री-गमन — PARADARA-GAMANA — ADULTERY

A Vow With Two Names

Where the previous chapter found a single vow wearing two names for two different purposes — asteya the boundary, chorya the disposition — this chapter opens on a vow that Acharya Samantabhadra himself chose to give two names at once, and the choice repays close attention. In the Ratnakaranda Shravakachara, the fourth anuvrata, brahmacharya for the ascetic, is rendered for the householder not as a single prohibition but as a pair: परदार-निवृत्ति (paradara-nivritti, the turning-away from another's spouse) bound together with स्वदार-सन्तोष (svadara-santosha, contentment with one's own). Acharya Kundakunda, writing in the earlier Prakrit tradition, frames the same vow with a similarly paired structure. Notice what this pairing refuses to do: it does not define the vow purely as a negative — a wall against transgression — but insists on naming, in the same breath, the positive psychological state the wall exists to protect. A vow that only says "do not" leaves a vacuum where desire still lives, unaddressed, waiting for its moment. A vow that says "do not — and cultivate contentment instead" is doing something closer to what a modern clinician would call redirection rather than suppression. That distinction, made explicitly by a tenth-century Acharya, turns out to anticipate one of the more important correctives contemporary relationship science has had to make to its own earlier, more purely prohibitive models of fidelity.

The classical texts locate paradara-gamana — going to another's spouse — among the seven vyasans for the same structural reason theft appears twice: because a single lapse and a settled disposition toward seeking pleasure outside one's committed bond are different orders of problem, and the vyasan names the disposition. And here too the tradition's underlying logic keeps circling back to ahimsa. The commentarial literature on this vow does not dwell primarily on notions of purity or possession; it dwells on injury — to the betrayed spouse's trust, to the stability of a household that children and extended family depend on for their own security, to the social fabric of a community organised, as most pre-modern communities were, around the presumed reliability of the marital bond. "All the rest," one traditional gloss on the anuvratas notes of the vows that follow ahimsa, "should be regarded as

means for its sustenance" — adultery, on this reading, is not a separate category of wrongdoing alongside violence; it is a form violence takes when it moves from the body into the architecture of trust that a family and a community are built on.

The Machinery Underneath the Wandering Eye

Contemporary attachment science, largely without reference to any of this, has spent the last two decades building a remarkably compatible account of why fidelity fails — and its central finding is that infidelity is far less often a simple deficit of willpower than a symptom of how a person's attachment system is wired to manage closeness and fear. A systematic review and meta-analysis published in Heliyon in 2024 (Ghiasi, Haseli, and Feli), synthesising the accumulated research on adult attachment style and marital infidelity, confirms a pattern that had already shown up repeatedly in smaller studies: both of the two insecure attachment orientations — anxious attachment, marked by a hunger for reassurance and a fear of abandonment, and avoidant attachment, marked by discomfort with sustained emotional closeness — are associated with meaningfully elevated risk of infidelity, for related but distinct reasons. The anxiously attached partner is, several studies in this literature find, more susceptible to seeking validation outside the relationship precisely when they feel insecure inside it — infidelity as a mismanaged bid for reassurance rather than a rejection of the primary bond. The avoidantly attached partner is more susceptible to seeking distance through a third party specifically because sustained intimacy itself, not the partner, is the thing generating discomfort. Neither pattern is well described by the folk model of infidelity as a straightforward failure of self-control; both are better described as an attachment system doing, badly, exactly what attachment systems are built to do — manage the felt security of a bond — under conditions the primary relationship has stopped supplying.

A separate and much older line of evidence, running back to David Buss and colleagues' foundational 1992 study in Psychological Science and robustly replicated across dozens of subsequent studies through a 2018 methodological review Buss co-authored reaffirming the finding's stability, documents a strikingly consistent asymmetry in how men and women respond to the mere thought of a partner's infidelity. Forced to imagine one scenario or the other, men, on average, report greater distress at imagining a partner's sexual infidelity; women, on average, report greater distress at imagining a partner's emotional infidelity — a pattern that shows up not only in self-report but in the physiological measures (heart rate, skin conductance, muscle tension) the original study used to cross-check what subjects said against what their bodies did. The evolutionary account offered for this

asymmetry — paternity uncertainty making a partner's sexual infidelity a graver reproductive threat to men, resource and commitment loss making a partner's emotional redirection a graver threat to women's investment in offspring — remains debated in its particulars, but the underlying empirical asymmetry itself has proven, across cultures and decades, to be one of the more durable findings in the psychology of jealousy. What both bodies of research converge on, whatever their disagreements on mechanism, is the same conclusion the Jain vow structure had already built into its own architecture: the threat that fidelity vows are trying to manage is not merely behavioural, a discrete act to be forbidden, but systemic — rooted in attachment needs and evolved threat-detection machinery that a bare prohibition does not, by itself, know how to address.

The World's Ledger, Read Carefully

The largest single dataset on infidelity ever assembled comes from an unconventional source: nearly 95,000 respondents (Savoie, Zinck, and Fisher, 2023) who completed an online questionnaire hosted by a website built around the subject of deception in relationships — a sample that must be read with an important caveat this book's own standards of evidence require stating plainly. Because respondents self-selected into a quiz about infidelity, the sample cannot be assumed representative of the general population the way a properly randomised national survey would be; people drawn to such a site may differ systematically from the population at large in ways that shift the numbers in unknown directions. With that caveat placed up front, the patterns within the dataset are nonetheless instructive, because they concern the shape of infidelity rather than its raw prevalence: men in the sample were 1.75 times more likely than women to report a purely sexual, casual encounter, while women were more likely to report emotional affairs, cybersex, and — notably — affairs with someone their partner already knew, and more likely to cite relationship dissatisfaction or boredom as the precipitating cause. On discovery, more than half of respondents (56.8 percent) reported confessing unprompted, with the remainder caught, confronted, or exposed by a third party — a distribution that, if it generalises at all, suggests concealment is harder to sustain than popular narratives about undetected affairs tend to assume.

For a more securely representative picture, the United States' General Social Survey — a nationally representative instrument running continuously since 1972 — offers cleaner ground: across its accumulated waves, roughly 20 percent of ever-married men and 13 percent of ever-married women report having had sex with someone other than their spouse while married, figures that (per analysis by the Institute for Family Studies) rise substantially with

age and show the gender gap widening rather than narrowing in the oldest cohorts surveyed — men in their seventies report the single highest rate of any age-and-sex group, at roughly a quarter. Whatever the precise number in any given country or decade, the direction of the evidence across every methodology used to gather it — clinical, national-survey, and even the self-selected online sample, once its limits are acknowledged — is the same: infidelity is common enough, and patterned enough by attachment style, age, and sex, to be a structural feature of long-term pair-bonding under strain rather than a rare aberration requiring no systemic account.

What Two Names for One Vow Got Right

Modern couples therapy, after decades of treating infidelity primarily as a discrete betrayal to be confessed, punished, and forgiven, has itself been moving toward something closer to the Jain vow's original two-part structure. The Gottman Institute's published clinical model for affair recovery, refined across a substantial body of outcome research including a 2024 pilot study on Gottman Method therapy specifically for infidelity, explicitly organises treatment not around punishment for the transgression but around two parallel tasks that map with unexpected precision onto paradara-nivritti and svadara-santosha: first, atonement and the rebuilding of trust — the turning-away, formalised and made visible — and second, and treated as equally indispensable, attunement — the deliberate, ongoing cultivation of emotional closeness and responsiveness between partners, the modern clinical language for what a tenth-century Acharya called santosha, contentment. Neither tradition, ancient or modern, treats the prohibition alone as sufficient. Both, independently, concluded that a bond asked only to avoid betrayal, with nothing built up to replace the need betrayal was reaching for, is a bond still standing on one leg. Samantabhadra gave the vow two names because he understood, without an attachment questionnaire or a couples-therapy outcome study to confirm it, that renunciation and cultivation are not two separate instructions but one instruction in two matched halves — and it has taken the accumulated clinical evidence of the last twenty years to show, in a different vocabulary, exactly why he was right to insist on both.

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